

"Speaking the Truth in Love"

Most of you know that Connie and I just returned from our vacation. What you may not know is that the first week we were gone, we attended an intense week-long course. It was recommended by Dr. Coffield and led by Christian author and psychologist Larry Crabb at the Billy Graham Training Center near Ashville North Carolina. It was called *The School of Spiritual Direction*. Here is how it was described:

This week-long intensive for 30 students... is an opportunity to understand and experience how the Spirit works deep in our souls to spiritually form us: and learn and practice a way of following the Spirit in others to arouse and direct their hunger for God.

Those last words are inviting: *a way of following the Spirit in others to arouse and direct their hunger for God*. Often when we talk to people considering Christian faith and message, we stress God's offer of forgiveness, redemption, and salvation to those who trust in Jesus. Something else God offers us is the opportunity to join him, to be instruments in his hands for having a good and meaningful impact on other people. That comes through in this Scripture.

We read the whole first part of **Ephesians 4** so that we would see how important Christian community is to God. The first three chapters of Ephesians emphasize that we are saved by the grace of God. Then **Ephesians 4** begins in **verse 1** by telling us to *"walk (or live) in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."* What follows is an emphasis on how we relate to each other in the church, this community of faith into which we have been called by grace. Then we're told that the risen Christ has given speaking and teachings gifts to certain individuals but why did he do this? Not so that they can do the ministry but... **verse 12**: *to equip the saints (the whole community and everyone in it) for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*. It is in explaining this that he uses the key phrase we are going to focus on in this message. **Verse 15**, *speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*.

In the church, the Christian community, Christ in us wants to work through us to make all of us more and more like him. For him to do his work through us, we must speak his truth in love.

There is an important part of this truth that is often missed. Speaking the truth in love is clearly a good thing. We often lift this phrase from Ephesians and let it just stand alone to make that point. We often hear it when we are about to speak some truth that might be hard to hear and we're told to temper the hard truth with kindness – speak the truth in love. But in this Scripture, what God is talking about and telling us is something more purposeful and specific.

I. SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE IS ESPECIALLY ABOUT HELPING PEOPLE BECOME MORE LIKE JESUS.

This was the point made in **verse 13** where it talks about *building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, (or humanity) to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.* It is in light of this that **verse 15** says, *speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.* In this passage, speaking the truth in love is not just about tempering hard truths with kind tones. It is about a greater vision of what God wants to do in the lives of people and a desire and commitment to be used by him in that work. ***Christ in us wants to work through us to make all of us together more and more like him. Speaking the truth in love is part of that work of Christ in us.***

A. Much of the time when we talk with friends at church, in our small groups, or socially, we're just trying to be friendly.

That's a good thing. Sometimes someone brings up a thorny issue that hurts and burdens them: the adult child lost in their addiction, a marriage that feels empty, a medical diagnosis that is scary. What then? We might just offer a listening ear or maybe if it is asked of us, and we are able, we might try to help in some small way. What is our goal in all that? Is it just to support a person or fix their problems?

B. What if at least, some of the time along with care and support you let God use you to do something deeper?

1. Here's a humbling thought: what if the truth is you don't know how to fix the addicted child, the indifferent husband, or the diseased body? What if God hasn't promised that the addicted child will become clean and sober or the indifferent husband becomes

stronger and kinder. What if God's *highest* purpose for your friend is not that all the issues of life resolve into happy endings tied up with a neat bow in this life but rather rather this idea of growing up into the yardstick, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

2. Please don't misunderstand. If the struggles of life can be resolved in good ways and we can help with that, it is a good thing. But sometimes we cannot control those outcomes or achieve those purposes. We need to see the deeper goal of God in our lives. When we are talking to people struggling with the issues of life, we need to be curious, compassionately curious about what God is doing in their souls. And we need to be willing to play whatever role we can play in being used by God to speak the truth in love.

In **Galatians 4:19** the apostle Paul has been speaking challenging truths to the Galatians. He asks if they think of him as an enemy because he told them the truth and then he reveals his purpose. He says, *my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!* What would it be like for a community of Christ-followers if we looked at, listened to, and spoke with each other with a vision and passion for Christ formed in us?

Illustration: I heard a story about a Christian man who came to one of his Christian friends and said, *"I need to talk with you, my wife is leaving me."* This man talked about the devastation of this thing, the feelings of rejection, the concern for the kids. His friend said his first reaction was basically two things. He wanted to comfort this man and also get involved somehow to try to talk his wife out of her divorce. But he knew he didn't have the power to do that. But as they spoke, he began to shift. He said he still wanted to comfort and help his friend, but something else began to emerge in his mind and heart. As their conversation drew to a close, he said to his friend, *"You were not put on earth to be married to that woman. You were put on earth to know God. Your ultimate goal in living is not the enjoyment of your marriage with your wife. It is something very, very different. Your primary purpose is to develop a relationship with God that is so strong that there will be joy and peace and a sense of purpose in your life whether you experience all the pain associated with divorce, or if she reconciles and comes back, which of course would be wonderful. But that is a secondary thing. The first thing has to do with your appetite for and experience of God."* That's speaking the truth in love. It isn't a technique we master. It is a way of relating to God and relating to

each other. *That's the first thing. We have to have this greater vision for what God is doing. This passion to see Christ formed in each other. Then also...*

II. TO SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE, WE HAVE TO SPEAK FROM LOVE.

Love is a big theme in the Bible. In **Ephesians 3**, Paul prayed that we would be rooted and grounded in God's love so that we can know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and be filled up to all the fullness of God. In **Ephesians 5** He says be imitators of God as beloved Children and *walk in love just as Christ loved you and gave himself for you!* He explained that what that means is to be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving. Then, right between those two great passages on love, here in **Ephesians 4**, the Holy Spirit tells us to *speak the truth in love*. Speaking truth is an action, but love has to do with the *manner* of our action and the *motivation* for it.

What motivates us when we speak with each other?

A. To speak with love, we have to take a look within ourselves.

In **Philippians 2**, we're told to have the same attitude in ourselves as was in Christ and then it specifically adds, do nothing from selfish motives. You might not think of this as selfish motivation but If I am talking with you, and maybe you have brought up some issue or problem or struggle, and as I talk to you I become aware that I'm really hoping you think I'm pretty smart, very helpful and wise, that colors a conversation. It can quench the work of the Holy Spirit. There is a way to talk with people that deeply connects to another person with life-giving power. It can't happen with every conversation with every person all the time. It doesn't need to. But it can with some people when there is an opportunity to go deeper. But with that kind of conversation, motivation matters. The power to speak life-giving words has to begin within. It's not a technique we master it is learning to speak to others from a purer place.

Jesus said some religious people in his day were like cups that were clean on the outside but dirty on the inside. He said, first clean the inside of the cup then the outside will be clean! So to speak with love we have to take a look within. Sometimes we have to pray silently in the moment: *"Lord, help me not to worry about how I look, or what they think, or even if I am being helpful. I renounce my pull toward*

self-centeredness for what it is, and ask that your love in me is released to love sincerely, and speak truth in love for you.”

B. To speak with love, we also have to have to listen well.

Have you ever opened up, maybe just cracked open the door on an issue in your life, perhaps in a conversation with a friend or in a small group, and there was no sincere curiosity to follow-up with that? Maybe you shared something personal and instead of following up with a thoughtful question you got some advice, or the other person launched into a story from their life that shifted the focus off you and onto them. Or, maybe a Scripture was quoted. I love when people share Scripture with me, but it's best when it is based on a thoughtful understanding of who I really am and what is going on in my life. Learn to listen well so that you can speak truth that is needed to the heart. **Proverbs 18:13** says, *If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.*

Proverbs 20:5 *The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.* There is a loving curiosity about another person that wants to honor that human being made in the image of God by exploring who they are and what God might be doing in them and what they most deeply need.

Illustration: When Dr. Coffield was here to do a seminar on what he calls, *conversations that matter*, he said to have conversations that matter, we need to be "*respectfully curious.*" By *respectfully curious* he meant not intrusive, prying into a person without regard for their feelings or respect for them as a person, but curious about what's going on in their inner world and curious about what God might be doing in their inner world. He said we should ask specific questions because people don't live in generalities. Ask for the story that reveals the specifics and when you can, move from the external, to the internal and to the eternal issues of life.

To speak the truth with love, we have to speak from love. That means we have to look within and we have to listen well. That last thing is this:

III. FOR THE TRUTH SPOKEN IN LOVE TO TRANSFORM US, AND OTHERS THROUGH US CHRIST HAS TO BE AT WORK IN US.

Look at **verses 15-16** again. *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.* There is something beautiful and liberating and powerful in those words. Those words at the beginning of **verse 16**, "*From whom,*" are talking about Christ! As we speak the truth in love, Christ in us is at work through us. That's crucial because when the goal is spiritual transformation the means must be supernaturally empowered. Often, when people share some issue with us, they are not looking for spiritual transformation. They might enjoy some sympathy. But what they want most is the problem fixed. If your goal in speaking the truth in love is aligned with God's goal of spiritual transformation so that they become more and more like Jesus, finding life in him even when their circumstances do not change, it's going to take the mysterious power of the Spirit of God at work in you *and* in them to gain a hearing that makes a difference.

Part of the good news of the gospel is that everyone who believes in Jesus has experienced a spiritual rebirth. As a result, there is something deep in the soul of every true Christian that wants that compelling vision of becoming more like Jesus. When you depend on Christ to work through you and speak the truth in love to them, you are connecting with something God has already awakened in their heart.

Illustration: Remember the man whose wife was leaving him? Sometime later he told his friend, *"When you told me that saving my marriage was a legitimate desire but if that didn't happen my purpose for living before God was still intact. You touched something in me that felt alive. And I left that conversation saying. There is a deep part of me that wants to know God, and I want to journey with this man so that appetite will become stronger and deeper and more alive.*

Conclusion

Let's work to make all of our conversations good and helpful. But let's look prayerfully for opportunities to have some conversations go deeper so that they are used by God to make us more like Jesus.

The gospel tells you that without Christ, you are lost. That's a hard truth, but God loves you too much not to tell you the truth. Our default of self-centeredness is like a moral rot in our hearts that requires grace

to be cleansed and healed. And God undeserved love. Christ died to pay for our sins. The moment you turn to him and trust in him, he not only forgives you, but he also comes to live in you by his Holy Spirit. ***Christ in us wants to work through all of us to make all of us together more and more like him. His grace and presence empowers us motivates us to speak the truth in love for him.***

Amen.